



## Finding of No Significant Impact

### *Upgrade and Rehabilitate Administrative Complex*

Recommended:

/s/ Curt Sauer

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Curt Sauer  
Acting Superintendent, Joshua Tree National Park

August 11, 2003

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Date

Approved:

/s/ Jon Jarvis

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Jon Jarvis  
Director, Pacific West Region

August 11, 2003

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Date

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## **Background**

The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed project is tiered from Joshua Tree National Park's General Management Plan (GMP) approved in 1996, which identified the need for upgrading and rehabilitating the headquarters complex. The GMP's draft (1994) and final (1995) EISs specified key elements for a new headquarters complex that would consolidate Visitor Protection, Facilities Management, and Resource Management offices, in addition to providing increased artifact storage and research space. Any comprehensive park headquarters construction plan, as directed by the 1996 General Management Plan, clearly should balance the provision of safe, accessible, and sustainable structures with the minimum possible disturbance to park resources or visitors, as mandated by National Park Service management policies.

## **Purpose and Need for Federal Action**

Present ranger operations are conducted out of two 1960s-era converted trailer residences, a salvaged real estate office, and a converted shed. All units fail to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) requirements for accessibility. The units are deteriorated to the point that it is not possible to maintain comfortable temperature ranges in hot or cold extremes. Electrical power for the Visitor Protection offices is connected with power sources providing electrical power to the entire headquarters' area. The electrical power source is currently tapped, creating brown-outs during times of peak electrical demand.

The current 800-square-foot space allotted to Facility Management is not adequate to accommodate three foremen, a landscape architect, a program assistant, the facility manager, and the office automation clerk. The current Facility Management office also lacks adequate electrical and data wiring to meet the operational demands of today's internet-based workplace.

A 26-year-old triple-wide trailer serves as the temporary office for the Resource Management division of Joshua Tree National Park, and lacks a specimen work laboratory necessary to execute resource analysis tasks associated with desert ecosystems protection. In addition, there is currently no meeting or conference room in which divisions can plan interdisciplinary project work.

Joshua Tree National Park's Museum Collections storage space is nearing full capacity with an expanding artifact and archival collection of 180,000 accessioned items and 150,000 unaccessioned and uncataloged items. In addition to active cultural and natural resource programs, the park has recently initiated a paleontology program, which will generate added storage needs. However, there is currently inadequate space for museum supplies, inadequate preparatory work space, and inadequate space for the proper storage of unaccessioned or uncataloged items.

In summary, the purpose of the proposal is to consolidate park managers into an ADA compliant, sustainable, and energy efficient administrative facility. This is necessary to provide for an adequate, safe work environment, as well as maintain proper curation treatments for park resources in the future. Overall the plan objectives will result in facilities that will fulfill the intent of the 1996 GMP.

## **Selected Action and Alternatives Considered**

The NPS identified and analyzed two alternatives for the environmental assessment process, a "preferred alternative" and a "no action" alternative; one additional option was considered and rejected from full analysis.

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*The Preferred Alternative* (as described in detail in the EA) is the alternative selected; this proposes a comprehensive plan for the rehabilitation and upgrade of the Headquarters area at Joshua Tree National Park. The selected project includes the following primary elements:

- Removal of six portable structures (totaling approximately 5500 square feet) currently used by Resource Management, Facilities Management, and Visitor Protection personnel;
- Construction of accessible, energy-efficient office buildings overlapping the footprints of existing portable structures, including Visitor Protection (approximately 2000 square feet), Facilities Management (approximately 2100 square feet), and Resources Management (approximately 2400 square feet, including a specimen work laboratory);
- Construction of accessible, energy efficient (approximately 1800-square-foot) addition to the Museum Collections storage space;
- Creation of secure, expanded parking for NPS employees (approximately 36 spaces), roofed with photovoltaic panels to provide shade for vehicles as well as meet 70 to 90 percent of overall energy requirements for the new administrative complex;
- Installation of a six-foot-tall wall between the new facilities and Utah Trail, faced with adobe-colored stucco to protect the view-shed of the nearby Oasis of Mara;
- The staff conference room will be designed to allow for use by the park for public events;
- Relocation of CNG pumps, replacement of overhead electrical lines with additional 400 amp underground feed, and introduction of water, sewer, natural gas, electrical, and data lines to all buildings;
- Plant materials from the park's Center for Arid Lands Restoration nursery will be utilized in revegetating staging areas and old unimproved roads and parking, landscaping throughout the new administrative complex, and tortoise habitat enhancement.

*The No Action Alternative* would result in no changes to the existing structures or facilities. No additional electrical power would be supplied to cope with increasingly frequent brown-outs. Temporary trailers would continue to serve as offices for Visitor Protection, Facilities Management, and Resource Management personnel. Accessibility requirements would not be met. No additional Museum Collections storage space would be built. The employee parking situation would remain static, with a continuing impact to adjacent visitor center parking areas and traffic flow.

In addition, the NPS considered, but eliminated from detailed study, a proposal to lease office space in the community of Twentynine Palms. A review of the origination of ownership for the Oasis of Mara parcel clearly demonstrates that the NPS risks forfeiture of the parcel, should it make the decision to relocate Joshua Tree National Park's Visitor Protection, Resource Management, and Facilities Management operations to leased office space in town. The potential effects of a reversion to private ownership to all associated park resources, including cultural resources, biotic communities, and endangered species, were deemed too significant to continue environmental analysis of this course of action as a "reasonable" alternative.

Of the two alternatives analyzed in the environmental assessment process, the Preferred Alternative is also "environmentally preferred". The environmentally preferred alternative is determined by applying the criteria suggested in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, which determination is guided by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The CEQ provides direction that "[t]he environmentally preferable alternative is the alternative that would promote the national environmental policy as expressed in Section 101 of NEPA..." The No Action Alternative would not achieve provisions 1, 2, 3,

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4, 5, and 6 of Section 101 of NEPA. In particular, long-term safety and efficiency issues of continuing to operate from substandard facilities would increase with time. The park's museum collections would also be adversely impacted in the long term by a policy of inaction. The Preferred Alternative would further the goals of all provisions of Section 101 of NEPA chiefly by providing for a safe, sustainable administrative facility, complete with museum collections storage and renewable energy sources, in less impacted area than the current facilities.

## **Mitigation Strategies**

Numerous mitigation measures have been built into the selected alternative that are designed to prevent adverse impacts to and degradation of natural and cultural resources. The mitigation measures will proceed as follows:

*Biotic communities mitigation* consists of a revegetation program to offset the loss of habitat due to construction activities. Less than one-half acre of new disturbance to biotic communities will occur during construction, and at the conclusion of construction, less than one-half acre of maintenance roads near the oasis will be rehabilitated to compensate. Joshua Tree National Park's staff botanist will take the lead in coordinating biotic communities mitigation.

*Species of special concern mitigation* consists of an integrated plan to minimize impacts to the Mojave desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). After repeated surveys, no live tortoises or signs of live tortoises have been discovered in the project area. Mitigation calls for continuing tortoise surveys by USFWS-approved biologists; a new tortoise survey will occur before each building is constructed. Temporary tortoise-proof fencing would be established around the staging area if signs of live tortoises were discovered during surveys; the specifications for the fencing are detailed in the environmental assessment document. In addition, a desert tortoise education program will be presented to all construction personnel, and raven- and coyote-proof trash containers will be provided for the proper disposal of all food-related trash generated on the construction site. Should a tortoise be encountered, construction activities would halt, and only a USFWS-approved biologist would be allowed to handle or relocate the tortoise, in accordance with procedures outlined in Guidelines for Handling Tortoises During Construction Projects (DTC 1994, revised 1996). Joshua Tree National Park's staff ecologist will take the lead in coordinating all endangered species mitigation. There will be no net loss of tortoise habitat as a result of biotic communities mitigation.

*Cultural resources mitigation* requires an archeologist to monitor all ground disturbance. Both construction activities and revegetation work will be monitored. If archeological resources were to be discovered, all work in the immediate vicinity would be halted until the resources could be identified and documented and an appropriate mitigation strategy developed, if necessary, in consultation with the California State Preservation Office. In the event that Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of patrimony are discovered during construction, provisions outlined in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (25 USC 3001) would be followed. A Discovery Plan is in place and will be followed in the event of the discovery of Native American human remains. Joshua Tree National Park's cultural resource manager will take the lead in coordinating cultural resources mitigation.

*Visitor experience mitigation* will be accomplished through interpretive talks at the Oasis of Mara and interpretive handouts detailing the construction's planning and long-term effects, available at the Oasis Visitor Center. This mitigation will be ongoing during the construction period. Joshua Tree National Park's Chief of Interpretation will take the lead in coordinating visitor experience mitigation.

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## **Why the Selected Action Will Not Significantly Effect the Park**

The selected alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment, as determined based on the ten criteria defined in 40 CFR 1508.27. A discussion of each of these criteria follows: Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. Under the selected alternative, construction activities will have moderate (definitions of the various intensities of impact—negligible, minor, moderate, and major—are detailed in the EA) short-term adverse impacts on visitor experience and negligible to minor short-term adverse impacts to park operations. Adverse impacts to endangered species, biotic communities, and cultural resources will be maintained at negligible levels. Long-term beneficial impacts of the construction to museum collections resources will be minor, and long-term beneficial impacts to park operations will be moderate in intensity.

Public health and safety will not be impacted by this action. The construction will not take place in a public area.

No wilderness or wild and scenic rivers are in the vicinity of the project site. No unique characteristics such as historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, or ecologically critical areas are adversely or permanently affected. The construction has been planned to remain in the footprint of previous facilities, minimizing new impacts to biotic communities and avoiding impacts to the unique wetland environment of the Oasis of Mara. During archeological work in 2003, all surface artifacts in the eastern developed end of the Oasis parcel were mapped and collected. Forty-seven 50cmx50cm units were excavated to a depth of 50cm and auger borings sampled soil to an additional 50cm. Two subsurface features were identified that are considered contributing elements to the National Register eligibility of the site but neither of these is in the Area of Potential Effect of this project. The project will not have an adverse effect on any contributing elements of this National Register eligible site, and there are no historic properties affected.

The foreseeable effects on the quality of the human environment are highly unlikely to be controversial. The NPS issued 2 press releases and sent sequential letters (scoping for EA and then EA availability) to all potentially interested individuals or organizations. During scoping the community of Twentynine Palms expressed support for a park facilities upgrade. There was one EA response from a conservation group representative of the Sierra Club who merely wished to verify that the proposed museum collections addition would be large enough to accommodate Joshua Tree National Park's expanding collection. The NPS has determined that there is unlikely to be any controversy surrounding this action.

The foreseeable effects on the quality of the human environment are neither highly uncertain nor involve unique or unknown risks. The impacts of the construction have been studied at length and do not involve unique or unknown risks.

The selected action neither establishes precedent for future actions with significant effects nor represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. This facilities upgrade has been contemplated in various park conservation planning processes ever since the 1994 release of Joshua Tree National Park's GMP draft Environmental Impact Statement. The headquarters' upgrade therefore represents no precedent for future actions with significant effects; rather, the action is a park operational goal tiered from a lengthy process of planning and study. The selected action is not connected to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant effects. As detailed in the environmental assessment, there is a history of disassociated construction projects in the developed eastern end of the NPS Oasis site. In contrast, the planned construction of this project, rather than continuing the trend towards building out from current facilities, has been designed to remain within the footprint of the buildings slated for replacement. Further reducing the possibility of cumulative impacts is the fact that the new structures

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will be sustainable, and depend less on existing utilities than at present.

Degree to which the selected action may adversely affect districts, sites, objects, highways, or structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places, or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources: The March 7, 1978 Federal Register (V43, N45) lists 40 acres of the 57.839-acre Oasis parcel as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places; the site map is unclear as to the location of this 40 acres. Accordingly, archeological reconnaissance work was performed in 2003; all surface artifacts in the eastern developed end of the Oasis parcel were mapped and collected. Forty-seven 50- by 50-centimeter units were excavated to a depth of 50 centimeters and auger borings sampled soil an additional 50 centimeters. Two subsurface features were identified that are considered contributing elements but neither of these is in the Area of Potential Effect of this project. A NHPA Section 106 consultation has been completed for this project, and it has been determined that the project will not have an adverse effect on any contributing elements of the National Register eligible site.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat: Undisturbed portions of the Oasis parcel is critical habitat for the Mojave desert tortoise; however, as documented in the EA, there are no tortoises currently living in or around the project area. Nevertheless, mitigation is set forth which calls for continuing tortoise surveys, providing tortoise recognition programs for all construction personnel, and installing raven- and coyote-proof trash containers for any food trash generated on the construction site. Total amount of potential tortoise habitat lost due to construction activities will be less than one-half acre. At the conclusion of construction, less than one-half acre will be revegetated to compensate. An ESA Section 7 consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been completed, and impacts to the Mojave desert tortoise will be maintained at negligible levels.

Implementing the selected action will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection or other law.

## **No Impairment**

In addition to reviewing the list of significance criteria, the NPS has determined that implementation of the selected action will not constitute an impairment of Joshua Tree National Park's resources and values. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the potential environmental impacts (described in the EA), consideration of the nature of the public comments received, concurrences from consulting agencies, application of relevant scientific studies, a review of literature regarding the Oasis of Mara, and the professional judgment of the decision-maker guided by NPS Management Policies 2001.

## **Public Involvement**

A 40-day public scoping process was conducted from November 22, 2002 to December 31, 2002 in order to gather comments from the interested public and concerned agencies to help focus the issues for drafting an environmental assessment (EA). A press release was distributed to local and regional media, and 96 letters were sent to a park-specific list of interested individuals and agencies, including representatives of all associated Indian tribes. There was one response, from the Community Development Director of the City of Twentynine Palms, expressing support for the proposal.

A 30-day EA review period was held from June 24, 2003 to July 25, 2003. A press release was issued and followup letters were sent to the park's distribution list. The EA was posted to the park's website, and 11 printed copies of the EA were also mailed out in response to requests. There was one response to the EA—the Palm Springs Chapter representative of the Sierra Club wished to verify that the proposed museum collections

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addition would be adequate to provide for present and future park needs; and also pointed out a discrepancy in square footage details (the attached Errata sheet for the EA clarifies the correct square footage of the museum collections addition). No written or other comments were received which provided substantive new information or raised issues not addressed in the EA.

A Section 106 (of the National Historic Preservation Act) consultation has been completed for this project, and it has been determined that the project will not have an adverse effect on any contributing elements of the National Register eligible site. There will be no historic properties affected.

A Section 7 (of the Endangered Species Act) consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been completed, and impacts to the Mojave desert tortoise will be maintained at negligible levels. With the concurrence of the USFWS (July 24, 2003) less than 0.5 acres will be revegetated to compensate for the negligible tortoise habitat effects.

## **Conclusion**

The selected alternative would implement actions tiered to the park GMP approved in 1996. Based on a full and open interdisciplinary analysis effort by NPS staff (and documented in the EA), and with due consideration of public comment and agency consults, it is the determination of the NPS that the selected alternative will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Adverse environmental impacts that could occur are short-term and minor to moderate in intensity. There are no unmitigatable adverse impacts on public health or safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, wetlands, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts have been identified, and implementing the selected actions will not violate any federal, state, or local law. It has been determined that there are no significant environmental consequences associated with the proposed upgrade to administrative facilities at Joshua Tree National Park. An environmental impact statement is not required and thus will not be prepared, and the approved actions may be implemented as soon as feasible.

## Errata Sheet for Joshua Tree National Park's Environmental Assessment, Upgrade and Rehabilitate Administrative Complex

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Text reading "3548-square-feet" should read "3348 square feet," as the proposed addition to Museum Collections storage space (currently 1548 square feet) would be an 1800-square-foot building.